

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 003852

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/E (SCHOFIELD, GAREY), AF/PD  
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM KDEM KPAO PREL ET VOA UNREST ELEC

SUBJECT: VOA'S AMHARIC SERVICE CONDEMNED BY GOE - NEED FOR PROOF

11. This cable contains an action request. See paragraph 12.

12. SUMMARY: On November 8, Charge d'Affaires met with local and London-based Voice of America correspondents. She used the meeting to discuss U.S. policy regarding Ethiopia, the role the VOA is playing in Ethiopia at a time when its listenership is likely at record levels, and Government of Ethiopia concerns regarding the objectivity of the VOA Amharic service. She provided them with background information on the country's evolving political situation and a brief on-the-record quote. Government of Ethiopia unhappiness with the VOA Amharic service is well known and increasingly loudly expressed -- and now threatens to result in the loss of vital coverage to Ethiopians. The most recent flare-up in GOE anger at VOA results from a VOA bulletin that calls for a stay-at-home strike and asks security forces to refuse to follow orders. Post requests confirmation on whether this item did in fact run on VOA and if so, please provide guidance on how to respond. An independent analysis of VOA's Amharic reporting is badly needed in order to respond to GOE concerns and ensure that VOA is not jammed or receives interference. END SUMMARY.

-----  
SETTING AN AGENDA FOR COOPERATION  
-----

13. On November 8, Charge met with London-based VOA English service correspondent Michael Drudge, along with local stringers Iskender Firew and Meleskachew Amaha (the latter still wearing bandages as a result of an October 26 beating by unidentified assailants). Joining the meeting were the Embassy's A/DCM, PA Counselor, IO, PolOff, and FSN Information Specialist.

14. Charge welcomed the journalists and consoled Meleskachew on his injuries, telling him she had raised her concerns about his assault with the Government. She noted the very real need for VOA reporting at a time when Ethiopians are unable to hear other independent voices -- and that both the Ethiopian people and the government were listening. She expressed hope that, as a part of the U.S. Government, VOA would be sensitive to U.S. policy issues and uphold its history of fair and balanced reporting. Referring to unconfirmed reports that the Government of Ethiopia may be attempting to interfere with the reception of VOA, she noted that, if true, it was a sign of how seriously VOA's reporting is taken. She cited a recent specific GOE complaint (see below) and used it as an example of how perceived bias can further impede the relationship between the GOE and VOA. [NOTE: Since November 7, VOA reception in Ethiopia has been increasingly unintelligible because of an overlay to its frequency of Government-owned Radio Fana, which has successfully reduced VOA's ability to be heard. END NOTE.]

15. Noting that she was well aware of the GOE's blanket reluctance to interact directly with the Amharic service, the Charge said that it was still possible to report on known GOE positions and important to present as broad a spectrum of opinion as possible. COMMENT: One of the problems is that VOA provides more news about the opposition and its activities than any other news. Even if VOA does not report GOE views, it could provide more news about other events in the country. END COMMENT.

16. During a lively and positive Q&A, the Charge drew on points presented to international correspondents at a background briefing earlier in the day to explain U.S. policy on the current situation. She described Ethiopia's current political situation and outlined the role the U.S. and the broader international community are playing to resolve the crisis and re-focus all sides on moving forward, including the November 6 joint EU/U.S. statement. She recapped what had taken place since internationally brokered negotiations began in early October (and subsequently ended) and noted her optimism that progress was still possible. She said that dialogue -- and a democratic future -- is not possible without renunciation of violence and cooperation between the government and the opposition.

17. She called for the VOA's help in focusing on the way forward, citing the absence of other voices and Ethiopians' always keen and increasing interest in VOA reporting guarantee it a crucial place in getting balanced, accurate information to them.

-----  
THE VOA IN ETHIOPIA  
-----

18. The current clampdown on private newspapers (in place since November 2), combined with the state's monopoly on broadcast media and its content, has meant that Ethiopians are increasingly relying on short-wave, local-language radio broadcasts by the VOA (and, to a lesser extent, by Deutsche Welle) for information on the rapidly evolving political situation in the country. A side effect of this increased prominence of VOA reporting has been ever-closer scrutiny of its coverage, especially through the Amharic service, by the government and its supporters. (NOTE: coverage by VOA's Tigrigna and Afaan Oromo services have escaped such criticism of late, although the former came under fire during the border war for alleged pro-Eritrean bias. Given that the opposition is heavily based in the Amhara region, the problem is specifically the Amharic service. END NOTE.)

19. The GOE's perception of bias was demonstrated this week by a November 7 letter to the Charge from State Minister of Foreign Affairs Tekeda Alemu, who decried "the very destructive role that the VOA Amharic service has been playing in its broadcast to Ethiopia." The letter goes on to call the broadcast "one of the major sources of instability...an instrument for stoking violence as well as for advancing and propagating the policies of the most hardliner section of the CUDP," and "a transmitter of the most destabilizing messages imaginable."

110. Accompanying the letter was the Amharic text and an English transcription of an excerpt from the news in the Saturday, November 5 broadcast, during the height of the violence in Addis Ababa, that gave the direct text from a leader of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUDP). This bulletin called for a stay-at-home strike beginning November 7, to continue until CUDP leaders are released from prison and the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) agreed to negotiations. The Ministry's English translation of the excerpt closed with what appeared to be a free-standing, unsourced statement: "The law enforcement agencies and the defence forces who are supposed to safeguard the safety of the public should immediately refrain from implementing orders." [NOTE: At the time that VOA broadcast this information the CUDP leader quoted was in hiding and was being sought by the Ethiopian authorities. He was not authorized to speak for the CUDP. But more worrisome still is the call for security and defense forces to disobey orders. END NOTE.]

111. COMMENT: Government and EPRDF dissatisfaction with and allegations of bias in VOA Amharic reporting are longstanding. The last such round took place in June, when VOA and DW local reporters lost their Ministry of Information accreditation (and at least one VOA stringer fled the country) and the state media carried denunciations of the reporting of both. Whether or not actual reporting carries biased or inaccurate information (and in general that seems not to be the case), recent Post review of the Amharic service does indicate that much coverage focuses on opposition activities, both in the country and in the Diaspora, with comparatively little illustrating other points of view. The very reluctance of the GOE and its supporters to engage with what it perceives as an opponent may in fact be a substantial contributing factor in the imbalance they perceive. END COMMENT.

112. ACTION ITEM: In order to reply to the Foreign Ministry's complaint, Post needs the complete text of the VOA broadcast and specifically wishes to know if the item calling on the armed forces to disobey orders was included. Post also requests guidance on how to reply to this specific complaint. Post would like independent data that would allow provide a better window into VOA Amharic reporting, allowing a better ability to evaluate allegations of bias. Given that a strong perception of actual bias exists, and that at least some imbalance may be demonstrable, Post suggests an impartial review of VOA Amharic reporting over the past six months. This suggestion is not made with the intent of pointing fingers, but to better enable Post to respond appropriately to the VOA's vehement detractors in Ethiopia and to ensure that VOA lives up to its reputation for fair and balanced reporting.

HUDDLESTON